

### THE PRESS AND PUBLIC OPINION.

As "A Bystander" Judge Tourgee moralizes upon the failure, or supposed failure, of the city press either to lead or correctly report popular opinion, and also upon certain supposititious superiorities of the country press. But let the Bystander state his own case:

The journalistic idea of public opinion is that certain leading men in specific lines of thought control and represent it in these lines. The truth most usually is that these men, instead of shaping public sentiment, are themselves molded by it. When such men are tapped by the interviewer and asked to tell what they think about any newly happened event, their ideas do not represent the public until they have had an opportunity to fill themselves with the drippings of public thought. They are not an important part of the current of public opinion but mere indicators who have first to be acted upon before they can point out its direction.

The fact is true, the inference false. Let it be supposed that a drainage bill is under discussion in the State Legislature; there are three classes of men whose opinions will have peculiar interest and probably peculiar influence upon the public—the scientists, the economists, the political leaders:

The scientists and economists surely are not "indicators," as Bystander would have it; they care nothing at all for the opinion of the mass; chemical, dynamical, hygienic facts will determine the judgment of the scientists for or against the measure, and the opinion of the economists will be swayed by circumstances of absolute or relative finance, against which the clamor of public approval or disapproval would beat in vain. The reporters are swift to find and faithful to report these men; and if the utterances of such do not sway and influence public opinion, it must be because prejudice or passion has gained supremacy over reason. The third class—the political leaders—are truly "indicators;" in that they reflect public opinion. The management of a great newspaper is well aware of this, and is well aware of something else, namely, that the political leaders have long opinions which they keep in constant exercise. So that when a Senator, Representative, or politician of lesser degree is interviewed by the reporter of a great newspaper, it is not the

reporter of any false estimate by the newspaper management of the value of his opinion, but because the management knows that what he says as "I think," "In my opinion," "I predict," and so on, is just what he has discovered by the constant exercise of his long antennae. He has felt his way to action in the matter of the bill under consideration before it was presented for consideration. He is an "indicator" only, but a most sensitive indicator.

Nor is the Bystander more sound in these deductions:

This principle is at the bottom of the familiar idea in journalism that while the city press assumes always to lead public opinion, it has to rely upon the country press for a knowledge of what public opinion is. The country paper is usually edited by a man of much greater knowledge of, and sympathy with, popular thought than the ordinary reporter who acts as the eyes and ears of the city journalist. For this reason the country press feels first and shows quickest any change in public sentiment or the drift of public opinion. And even these watchers of public thought fail sometimes to catch the real significance of what the people actually say to each other—of the looks and tones which accompany the words, and are in many instances the most important exponents of the thought intended to be conveyed.

Now, we have in mind a city newspaper which prints about 130,000 copies for what may be called "country circulation" alone. Very few of these 130,000 go into cities of more than 20,000 population. We know that the newspaper is, apart from its regular and paid correspondents, deluged with information as to the state of opinion in every village of the Northwest. The most active-minded men "write to the paper," often with strange spelling and utter defiance of prosody, but almost always vigorously; they approve its opinions, on this matter, oppose on that, ask for more information on another; they tell the editor that Blank can't poll the party strength in their precinct, or that Asterisk can carry the party, and part of the other party, too. The peculiarity of these country letters is that while they often lack grace they seldom lack sense, and never lack honesty of purpose.

The country editor, described by the Bystander as "a man of much greater knowledge of and sympathy with popular thought than the ordinary reporter," who has with him the ordinary reporter, who has with

editing a country one. The city press is under great obligations to the editorial fraternity in the country; but not the less is it true that the city press is always first to index public opinion on any given measure. "The ordinary reporter" never is intrusted with delicate work, and the extraordinary reporter, the highly trained and highly endowed person, to whom difficult tasks are allotted, is a very extraordinary person indeed. While on duty he has no opinions of his own, and he is quick to conjecture, and almost certain to detect, the opinions of others, and having gained them he records them. There are not half a dozen men now in public life who can keep their opinions concealed, by any process short of downright lying, from a first-class reporter. And "the looks and tones" on which Bystander relies so much are as closely observed by a reporter as the flight of a young bird is by a trained setter. The forecast of public opinion given by the daily press of the great cities is electric in its swiftness and almost photographic in its accuracy.